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An Exploration of the Subaltern and Feminist Voices in Indira Goswami's Select Novels

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SYNOPSIS

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Introduction:

Indira Goswami, popularly known as Mamoni Raisam Goswami or Mamoni Baidau is an intelligent and celebrated writer, editor, poet, professor and scholar of Assamese literature whose works have been translated into English from her native language Assamese. Her famous novel, *The Moth Eaten Howdah of Tusker* has been translated into English in 2004.This novel was written during her stay at the University of Delhi with another celebrated novel *Pages Stained with Blood*. She has completed most of her greatest works which include *Hriday*, *Nangath Sohor*, *Ahiron*, *The Rusted Sword*, *Uday Bhanu*, *Dasharathi's Steps*, *The Man from Chinnamasta*, *The Blue Necked God*, *Rani* etc. and used Delhi as the background. *Jatra* the journey based on the problems of military that has affected entire North-East India was an important product of this period. Her other literary works include *The Unfinished Autobiography*, *The Chenab's Current*, *Shadow of the Dark God* etc. Her famous novel, *The Moth Eaten Howdah of Tusker*, describes the pathetic condition s of Assamese Brahmin widows in Satra, religious institutions of Assam. The novel was made into a film named Adajya and won many national and international film festival awards.

The other awards received by her include - Sahitya Akademi award for *Mamore Dhara Torual*, Bharat Nirman Award, Sauhardya award of Uttar Pradesh Hindi Sansthan of Government of India, Katha national award for literature , Kamal Kumari foundation national award, Jnanpith award, D. Litt. from Rabindranath Bharati University, West Bengal Mahiyoshi Joymoti award by Ahom court of Assam, D.Litt. degree from Rajib Gandhi University, Arunachal Pradesh, D. Litt degree from Indira Gandhi National Open University, award of the Ambassador for peace from the Interreligious and International Federation for world Peace, The International Tulsi award from Florida International University for her book, *Ramayana From Ganga to Brahmaputra* and Asom-Ratna, the highest civilian award in the state of Assam, India.

Review of Literature

The term "Subaltern" has been taken from the word" Subaltern us". In Latin "sub" means "under" and "alter" means "other". So, it can be referred to an individual or a group/s considered inferior. 'Subaltern Literature' is one of the sub divisions of post colonialism. It denotes a subordinate position in terms of class, gender, race and culture. It can be referred to someone who is oppressed or marginalised, who has a low position in social, political or other hierarchies. The subaltern study is mainly related with thinkers like Antonio Gramsci, Ranjit Guha, and Gayatri Chakarborty Spivak. Antonio Gamsci, the Italian Marxist coined the term subaltern to identify the social groups excluded and displaced from the socio-economic institutions of society in order to deny them their political voices. Gayatri Chakroborty Spivak added a new dimension to the term subaltern for the colonised people, oppressed generation, working classes, blacks and muted women. According to her, the term is flexible and it can have room for social identities and struggle such as women and the colonised.

This concept is also defined by another renowned thinker, Julian wolfrey. The term subaltern was also adopted and developed by subaltern studies group, originally referred to a loose conditions of Indians and British historians under the leadership of Ranjit Guha, since the early 1980s. These have dedicated themselves for offering a radical alternative to traditional colonial and elite nationalist versions of nineteenth and twentieth century Indian history. It refers to the different themes like gender discrimination, exploitation, oppressions, marginalisation, subjugation of lower and working classes, disregarded women, neglected sections of society, deprived classes and so on.

The Tradition of Feminism and the Concept of New Woman:

The new woman was a feministic ideal that emerged in the late nineteenth century. The term was coined and first used by writer Charles Reade in his novel *A Woman Hater*. In 1894, Irish writer, Sarah Grand used the term in her article *The New Aspects of the Woman Question* to refer to independent woman seeking radical change. Later, the term was popularized by British-American writer Henry James, who used it to describe the growth in the number of feminist, educated, independent career women in Europe and the United States.

The term New Woman always referred to women who exercised control over their own lives be it personal, social or economic (palmer1993:2)New Women are modern in their thoughts, they challenge against all the odds of society and establish themselves as an independent and confident .They try hard to come out of their marginalised, oppressed position to embellish their life with their own identity. The theme of New Woman can be traced in many literary works like in drama and fictions of nineteenth century. In drama, these can be found mostly in the works of Henrik Ibsen, Henry Arthor James and George Barnard shaw. In fiction, writers like Sara Grand, Olive Schreiner, Annie Sophie Cory, Ella Hepworth Dixon has modern characters. In Indian literature writers like R. K. Narayan, Arundhati Roy, Sashi Deshpande and Indira Goswami has many rebellious, courageous, confident and radical characters.

Voice of Women in Indira Gowswami's Novels :

Indira Goswami's famous novel, *The Moth Eaten Howdah of Tusker* deals with woman characters like Durga, Saru, and Giribala. They are described as oppressed, dominated, isolated from the mainstream of their lives. The characters presented in the novel are widows of Assamese Orthodox Brahmin society of post Independence era of South Kamrup, Assam. The novelist describes a lively picture of the widows living within four walls of Sattra system where they were forced to bury their longing for life, an opportunity to live a life of their own, they were oppressed, isolated and in the process, they have also lost their identity. They are victims of patriarchal society. They are the puppets of the system. They feel alienated and suffer socially, culturally and personally. The three main women characters of the novel, Giribala, Saru Gossaine and Durga, are widows and they are victimized by the systems of patriarchal society where they are tortured by the followers of heartless patriarchal society. They have to undergo many strict rules and regulations like limitations in food, social contact, clothes and even they have to bury their dreams, desires etc.

Indira Goswami's another novel *Chinnamastar Manuhtu* translated by Prasanta Goswami as *The Man from Chinnamasta*, published in 2005, is based on Kamakhya temple of Nilachal hill in which the age old practice of animal sacrifice is presented. There are many stories related with the origin of the temple. The Sanctum of the temple is in Yoni Shape. It has become the centre for the fertility cult. The novel is about Chinnamasta Jatadhari, a serious and erudite man and his follower and a perfomer Ratnadhar. Both of them tried to

abolish the age old practice of animal sacrifice. The novel delineates the two main characters, Dorothy Brown, a foreigner and Bidhibala, a child bride, through which novelist Goswami expresses about the traditions, systems of patriarchal society. In this novel, there is a description of animal sacrifice system.

The novel is based on Kamakhya temple situated at the 260 feet above the sea level and the most significant places of Sakti worship in India. The Ambubachi and other rituals are still prevalent...The character Dorothy Brown is a foreigner who looks for sanctuary with the Jatadhari , the protagonist of the novel an ascetic with the matted locks. He takes bath early morning in the river Brahmaputra and chants the hymns to the sixty four goddesses. There is also description of another character named Ratnadhar who is a loyal follower of Jatadhari, an artist with delicate hands. Other character Bidhibala, is a child bride. Both of them are sufferer, victims of patriarchal society where woman is given importance only for her womb. Otherwise, she doesn't have her existence. They also protests against the system of animal sacrifice. The child bride and heroin of the novel Bidhibala is abducted by a group of whores. The novel describes about the system and dominance of patriarchy. The child bride Bidhibala is a live example of the cruel and inhuman rules imposed by society on her to marry a person double of her age where as she is only eleven years old. The rules of Brahmin society said that a girl should get married before she gains puberty. This system forces them to get married at an early age to an aged person as a result of which the person or the husband dies early and they become widows at an early age. The widows are helpless and become victims of traditional and conversational systems.

Indira Goswami's *The Blue Necked God* offers a graphic picture of the plightful condition of the Hindu widows in Vrindavan, holy city of Lord Krishna. The novel tells about the exploitation of the Hindu widows under the placard of religious and traditional norms. The main character of the novel is Saudamini, who is a widow and hence her family has brought her to Vrindavan as they suspected that she had started having an affair with a Christian youth soon after she became a widow. The novelist has described Saudamini as a new and young confident, protesting woman who is independent and can think of her own. And hence, she is a new woman raising her voice for her own self .She has the courage to walk on the forbidden path as considered by the orthodox society. She did whatever she wanted to do by not following the rules imposed on her by the society.

Voices of other subaltern groups in Indira Goswami's Novels:

The voices of other subaltern groups are prevalent in Indira Goswami's novel, *The Moth Eaten Howdah of Tusker*. As the novel is about the Sattra system of South Kamrup of Assam, it describes about the Satyradhikars,(the monastery head) who are owner of vast tracts of land. The name of the novel "Moth Eaten Howdah" has the symbolic meaning. Howdah is the symbol of richness, power and grandeur of its owner which is placed at the back of the Elephant. But now this Howdah is eaten up and destroyed by worms. The elephant throws it off and smashes into pieces when he gets angry and tired of carrying the decorated Howdah and at last the meek and gentle animal is killed. In the same way, the peasants raise their voices and protests against the feudal systems run by the Satyradhikars. Indranath, the future Adhikari of the area is killed by the peasants who were tortured and oppressed by feudal system.

The novel also describes about plightful conditions and despair of both the victims and victimizer. The feudal families i.e. Sattradhikars has become poor during recent times but as they have to follow the rigid caste systems, they cannot mingle and show sympathy with the common folk or villagers. As a result, they feel alienated and suffer measurable conditions. They become poor but can't get rid of the so called pride of Sattras. Thus, the novel describes about the oppressed conditions of peasant classes and their protests against the feudal system.

The Feminist Voice in Indira Goswami's Novels:

In the novel, *The Moth Eaten Howdah of Tusker,* Durga is a widow who is the eldest among the other two widows, Giribala and Saru Gossaine. She surrenders herself to the system of patriarchal society. Another widow, Saru Gossaine, a young woman, feels for Muhidhar, but is not brave enough to express her feelings to him. She feels a kind of pure, divine and bodily attraction towards him. Giribala is the youngest widow described in the novel. She is brave enough to live her life according to her wish. She is also described as a rebellious woman who is not ready to spend her life within the four walls following the strict and inhuman rules made especially for the widows which makes them alienated, isolated from the society where male creates limitation in their lives. She is not ready to follow the rules and regulations of male dominated society where every time she is humiliated, oppressed, re-pressed and instead she prefers to embrace death for her ultimate

freedom. Thus, she acts as a representative of new woman where she doesn't want to be victimized or be a sufferer of the unkindness, limitations or barriers put by the society.

In the novel *The Man from Chinnamasta*, the novelist presents three women characters' journey from their pathetic, oppressed and isolated condition to a position where they can think about their wishes, dreams and can raise their voices against the orthodox system They are in a position to raise their voices against their husbands, fathers to achieve their freedom and though in the process they lost their lives. It's not only their protests against patriarchy but also the protest of all oppressed and victims of Orthodox Hindu society. It's their revolutionary act of taking decision on their own to put an end to their pathetic condition created by the society. They are not like other women who unconditionally, mutely follow the traditional norms of patriarchal society. They are new women. They can think and take decisions on their own and even to achieve their self fulfilment; they can break the restrictions imposed on them by the society. They are empowered with their honest and serious thoughts to live their lives like other human beings of the society. They don't want to end their lives being a puppet by following the practices of patriarchal society where they are forced to live a dull and unfulfilled life.

In the novel, *The Blue Necked God* Soudamini is a brave character. She wanted to live her life to the fullest. Therefore, she denies complying with the demands of her father. She protests against her father's directions and says that "she can't spend her entire life doing charity work. She also tells him that she is not a Devi. She says that she is an ordinary girl, and cannot pass all her years in serving society like him. She wants him to understand that she is an independent person and fears nothing". (Bhattacharyya 71).

Because of her such kind of daring act and decision, society blames and termes her as "fallen woman" Saudamini has a wish to love the Christian youth but she feels she cannot do that at the cost of her father's life. But when she hears that her father has left her and offered her life to river Jamuna, She feels sad and broken and surrenders herself to river Jamuna. Though she couldn't take her own decision during the life time, finally, she takes a courageous decision by throwing herself in the river Jamuna proving that she will not follow the rules of patriarchal system, instead she will choose to die and thus sets her free from the system. At this point, she acts as an independent woman not ready to be victimized.

Thus, in this three selected novels of Indira Goswami the theme of subalternity in women and others and New Woman has been reflected in different characters and class

systems existed in the society of post-Independent era. At first, they are isolated, alienated, disregarded, unfortunate and oppressed women. They are forced to live their lives following the hard and inhuman rules and regulations imposed on them by the patriarchal society. But as they are not ready to follow the systems, they protest against it and in the process they even lose their lives. Here, they prove that nothing, not even the death threat can dissuade them from their decision to become the free and independent woman.

Objectives

The main objective of the proposed research is to study the voice of Subaltern in selected novels of Indira Goswami. Besides, the present study aims,

1. To discuss the status and conditions of women, in these novels;
2. To explore the status and condition of other subaltern groups in these novels;
3. To examine these novels critically in terms of oppression, victimisation, patriarchy and society and its role in general;
4. To evaluate the nature of Subaltern and effect of Culture on their lives;
5. To locate the concept 'new woman' and bring out their role as detected in these novels; and
6. To examine whether the voices of 'new woman, are different from the traditional subaltern voices and voice of 'new woman' as found in the works of other feminist writers.

Hypothesis

Indian English novelists, especially women novelists are known to deal with the themes of oppression and subjugation. Therefore, most of them tend to speak about the pathetic condition of women in their literary creations. Indira Goswami is also an Indian Woman novelist and her literary works deal with variety of themes. But the prominent themes in her novels are woman and other marginalised sections of the society. Therefore, Indira Goswami's novels deal with the three them. Hence Indiara Goswami's novels thematically and characteristically try to show the subaltern sections of the society and their condition.

Significance and Relevance of the Proposed Research

The present research is an attempt to contribute to the world of literature in some special aspects. This research work will study about the women, particularly of Hindu widows and other subaltern groups as reflected in the novels of Indira Goswami. New Woman and her condition will also be discussed in this study. It is seen that subaltern being marginalized sections, live a disregarded, unfortunate life. The Novelist presents lively and graphic pictures of the realistic conditions of the women of her time. It's not just a tale, it's about her experiences. The stories of the novels are based on realities prevalent in the society around. Hence, the research is not merely an examination of textual themes but it is the study of implied socio-cultural reality. It will add or contribute to the Indian literature about the subaltern groups and also to the literature dealing with New Woman.

Scope and Limitations

The present research attempts to study about the germination of new woman and voice of the marginalised and oppressed groups of the society in the selected novels namely, *The Moth Eaten Howdah of Tusker*, *The Man from Chinnamasta* and *The Blue Necked God* written by Indira Goswami. Though Indira Goswami's novels deal with North-Eastern states in general, her characters transcend the boundaries of place and become universal. Thematically, her works deal with the social realities, especially with the condition of woman and other marginalised groups. Therefore, the scope of this study extends to theories of feminism and Marxism. It also encompasses individual psyche and social psyche in order to understand the causes of oppression of the marginalised massed and becomes a limited study in psychoanalysis. The study will expose the real conditions of women characters specially widows existed as oppressed and marginalized in the Assamese Orthodox society and their journey to reach a position where their wishes can be fulfilled.

However, this study is textual analysis of the themes and characters in the novels of Indira Goswami. Therefore, its scope is limited to the textual analysis. It does not go beyond the text to collect samples from the society in order to understand the conditions of the subaltern and New Woman. Moreover, it is a study in single author. Hence, it does not allow the researcher to consider other works to be compared and contrasted with the works under study.

Methodology

The proposed work is based on both primary and secondary sources and information. The study is analytical and based on critical analysis of the selected novels of Indira Goswami. Both descriptive and analytical method will be used to reach the conclusions. The study is not related to any kind of field work and hence the method of field work, survey etc. is not required. The primary sources are the texts of the novels, *The Moth Eaten Howdah of Tusker*, *The Man from Chinnamasta* and *The blue Necked God.*

The secondary sources include articles, research papers, critical books, journals, book reviews and e- content etc. The 8th Edition of MLA style would be used to cite the sources and acknowledgements.

Plan of the thesis

The proposed thesis consists of the following six chapters.

Chapter -1: Introduction;

Chapter -2: History and Theory of 'Subaltern' and 'Feminist Writings';

Chapter-3: Voice of Subaltern woman in Indira Goswami's Novels;

Chapter- 4: Voices of others Subaltern groups in Indira Goswami's Novels;

Chapter -5: Feminist Voices in Indira Goswami's Novels;

Chapter- 6: Conclusion.

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